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ABSTRACT

Community educators need to provide grassroots leadership training, as can be seen by an examination of five points. First, a positive relationship exists between the quality of participation and the quality of leadership. Leadership should aim for team-directed action that meets member interests and concerns in the team's environment. Shared leadership activates the resources of all of a group's members in directing and conducting group tasks. Second, grassroots leadership can be taught and learned, as exemplified by the Leadership Development Program offered by the Community Leadership Training Center of Western Michigan University. Its learning objectives are trainee awareness, understanding, and use of specific skills that drive the processes of group communication, consensus formation, problem-solving, decision-making, planning, and evaluation. Skills are described in brief lectures followed by trainees' working on a structured experience. In a processing stage, data of trainees' experiences are closely examined. Third, the costs of teaching and learning leadership abilities are low enough in terms of time, energy, and money to make training practical. Fourth, very few opportunities exist for grassroots people in neighborhoods to obtain leadership training. Fifth, community educators are strategically placed and qualified to deliver grassroots leadership training. (YLB)

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GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP TRAINING: A CASE STUDY OF A MODEL IN ACTION

by
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at the

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Here are five questions you may use to rate your perception of the present situation in grassroots leadership training. Each can be answered True or False. If you score a hundred percent, you are ready for an expanded career in leadership training at the grassroots level. If you score is zero, you are poised at the brink of a new opportunity in leadership training at the grassroots level. So, no matter how you score, you make out with my test.

ONE: There is a relation between the quality of grassroots citizen participation in building community, and the quality of grassroots leadership.

TWO: Grassroots leadership can be taught and learned.

THREE: The costs of teaching and learning leadership (in terms of time, energy, money) are low enough to make training practical.

FOUR: There are very few opportunities for grassroots people to obtain leadership training.

FIVE: Community educators are strategically placed and qualified to deliver grassroots leadership training.

Depending on your perceptions, it is possible to score anywhere from zero (all False), to one hundred (all True), according to the design of my quiz. Now, my reasons for weighting the correct answers as all True

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are simply these: In our study in Kalamazoo, Michigan, we find that first, there is a strong positive relation between the quality of participation and the quality of leadership; second, grassroots leadership can be taught and learned; third, the costs of the teaching-learning work are very low; fourth, there are very few opportunities for grassroots folks to obtain leadership training; fifth, community educators are strategically placed and qualified to deliver grassroots leadership training. My remarks will deal with these five points.

As I begin, let me emphasize my main point. It is simply this: there is a very large and urgent need for community educators to provide grassroots leadership training in communities all across this land of ours. I hope to convince you of this in the time we have for this discussion this afternoon. But what you should do about meeting this need is strictly up to you.

First. My claim that there is a positive relation between the quality of participation--in building community--and the quality of leadership is based on our experience in working with neighborhood groups in Kalamazoo. I shall only cite one group of many we have worked with and trace what happened to them in some depth. The Eastside Neighborhood Association is one of about 21 Kalamazoo neighborhood organizations dedicated to improving their physical, social, and economic environment. They do this by studying, planning, maintaining, revitalizing, and enhancing the neighborhoods' homes, businesses and institutional buildings, facilities, and so on. They seek more pleasant and safe places in which to live and work. This Association was incorportated as a non-profit entity in 1975, under the impetus of the federal community

development block grant program. Today it includes about 2,950 citizens, and is managed by a Board of eleven directors. I should note that the neighborhood is made up of about 50 percent home owners and 50 percent renters, and the white-to-minority ratio is also about fifty-fifty. Also, today the Association's board still has many of the original incorporating members. The leadership has stayed on the job. An important early accomplishment included the acquisition and development of a City-owned neighborhood center facility. The building, formerly a church edifice, provided a place to offer a day care program; training classes in leisure, arts and crafts, exercise, and recreation; a reading tutor program; plus a facility for scout meetings, 4-H activities, and numerous other neighborhood events. Clearly a lot of neighborhood ownership was developed in this good place. (This was fortunate because the neighborhood school had been closed).

Another early achievement of the Board was influencing the passing of a major re-zoning regulation that restricted dwellings to single homes and duplexes, thereby avoiding the fractionalizing of residences into multi-unit rental dwellings. Further, many human services, especially for seniors were introduced, and the advent of a community newsletter enhanced communication. In sum, a better neighborhood was built by that leadership, as evidenced by the improvements in the quality of the environment physically and socially. Certainly these early achievements may be attributed to both the quality of leadership and the excitement of getting a new venture off the ground.

In 1980, about five years after their start-up, the leadership began to tire, to sense a growing apathy, to feel a tendency to inertia, to be at a loss for better ways to approach problems. Early in 1981 the Board

learned about the Leadership Development Program offered by the Community Leadership Training Center of Western Michigan University, and arranged for Board members to take the training one evening a week for about six weeks. The purpose of the Leadership Development Program which was set up under a Mott Foundation grant, is to help members of community organization boards, committees, and task groups carry out group decision making, problem solving, planning or other tasks more effectively or productively. These are leadersthip tasks.

Now you well may ask, what skills must members of a neighborhood or community group have to be effective individually and as a group? We believe there are at least four sets of skills, which taken together, enable a group to successfully direct its action toward achieving specific results. The first set is communication, especially interpersonal communication. The second is managing meetings, especially the phases of consensus formation. The third set is problem-solving, or alternatively, decision-making. The fourth set is planning implementation of a solution or decision, and then evaluating its result or outcome.

The basic assumption of the Center's program in leadership development for grassroots groups is that team-directed action contains within itself the most powerful motivation known for the accomplishment of truly effective teamwork.. Team-directed action aims first at meeting member interests and concerns in the team's environment. This kind of shared leadership activates the resources of all a group's members in directing and conducting group tasks. Where this kind of leadership thrives, it is coordinated, orderly, goal-oriented, and results-producing. At its core it is truly democratic and shared leadership.

I want you to know that the members of the Board of Directors of the Eastside Neighborhood Association took the leadership workshops seriously. They were faithful in their attendance. And almost immediately they incorporated the skills, processes, and strategies into their own stock of resources. Chet Douglass, a life-time Eastside resident, retired chief of the Kalamazoo Fire Department, and a former president of the Association said of his experiencein the training; "It gave me a sense of the meaning of consensus. I was a Roberts Rules of Order man before. But in Roberts you fail to get everybody's ideas; and, the chair can get his way; that's not fair, it's not involving everyone. I've since learned to respect others' thoughts and to get others to enter into the discussion." He observed that members of the Board "are now more outgoing, they enter into the discussions. Some have shown great improvement. I wish even more would. They are learning to be listeners. You know, some people overwhelm you with talking too much. The course taught this to two members I know, who finally said: 'I'm talking too much.'" Then he added, It's making a difference. We are not so formal; we don't have to wait to be recognized to get the floor. Formality may be okay for some groups, but for our Neighborhood Association, the informal consensus process is better. We encourage everyone to speak up."

Chet Douglass' observation about increased participation was readily confirmed by another Board member, Lucille Dooley. A retired special education teacher in Kalamazoo's public schools, she says, "We have more neighborhood participation, and more participation on the Board, not just Chet or one or two." She notes that "more is done out in the open--not 'would you head that committee and take care of it?'--rather

the Board discusses (a matter) more; so, the committee knows what the Board wants. We've got past the stage where a little clique was running things." Lucille Dooley also commented about herself: "I've felt freer to discuss things in a group. I feel much more of a need to give my idea instead of to see which way the wind blows." Then she adds: "I've carried what I've learned over into my church work; we've done more on consensus there."

Other's reactions to the leadership training experience are similar. Chuck Bidleman, director of the Eastside Center since 1976 puts it this way: "The effect of the training program has been to revitalize the Board members themselves. They found through the training that their neighborhood work offers opportunity rather than drudgery. They turned from being passive to being active players; from being aliens to being insiders. They found faith in the group processes (of the training model)."

These comments I think reflect the notion that the leadership development program enhanced the ability of the Association's Board to handle its tasks, and in effect to provide stronger leadership. The renewal experience bears out the importance of the relation between quality participation and quality leadership in building community. They go together like hand in glove.

The second point I wish to make is that grassroots leadership can be taught and learned. This has been demonstrated in part by data I have already presented. Now I should explain what the leadership program's objectives are, how they are reached, and how learning occurs.

The learning objectives are trainee awareness, understanding, and

use of specific skills that drive the processes of group communication, consensus formation, problem-solving/decision-making, planning and evaluation. For example, the communication skills include some 13 discrete skills having to do with message sending, message receiving, and interacting. The learning objectives embrace trainees's consciously experiencing what these skills do and how they do it as they drive the group process of organizing cooperation for the coordination of group work.

Similarly, trainees experience the function and meaning of consensus formation: the phases of the chair's organization of the group and stating the charge to the group; digesting or understanding the charge; offering information for dealing with the charge; distilling members' ideas and perspectives into a definite form and thrust to satisfy the charge; resolving or settling on the group decision in response to the charge. As you would imagine, the communication skills and the consensus formation skills are intimately related. The learning objectives include that trainees experience the meaning of the inter-relation.

The problem-solving skills, about a dozen, are very discretely defined, and their relationships experienced. Similarly, the learning objectives include some seven planning skills; and, six evaluation skills. And planning and evaluation are closely inter-related in the experience of the trainees.

How are these skills presented and experienced? The model uses very brief lecturettes to describe the skill followed by trainees working on a structured experience. For example, a neighborhood group may be asked to individually write down on an exercise sheet the most pressing problem the group faces in the neighborhood, that they should

deal with. Each does this. Then each is asked to share his/her problem statement, and the others are asked to write it down, under their own. When each has shared, the group is asked to collectively discuss the problems and to select the three most critical or important, that they should deal with. Such a structured experience demands careful communication, listening, strong feedback (we emphasize feedback), thinking, working together.

The trainees next go through a processing stage: the data of their experience during the exercise is closely examined. A record of their comments on their experience is recorded on news-print for all to see. Each member is asked by the facilitator to share what he or she saw and felt as the group worked out the priorities; how he or she explained or accounted for the experience of what they saw and felt; what they find is significant or important in that explanation; then, what general rule or principle can be observed in the important or significant element. Finally, he or she is asked how they would apply that principle if they were to work on a prioritizing of what members like most about the neighborhood group's way of working on its problems.

This working through of each person's experience, for all to see, is called processing. It helps each trainee to discover the meaning of what they do, as they use a skill, or work a procedure. The structured experience exercise, together with the processing of each member's experience, is the strategy of experiential learning. It is very powerful. And this is the way the learning occurs in this model. All the exercises deal with real-life situations, or very close simulations. The reality intensifies the meaningfulness of the learning work.

I want to return to the story of the Association and I would like to put some frosting on the cake. Not long after the Association Board itself participated in the training program, other Association groups, mainly committees and task force members, asked for the training. I believe about three such groups were then trained.

In one of them was a certain Kathy Smith, mother of seven, who was invited to the training by a neighbor. Kathy had lived in the neighborhood for about two years, but had not participated in its activities. She found such participation difficult on at least two counts: one, she experienced a lack of self-confidence and social ability; two, she experienced a deep personal tradgedy, which added to her feelings of inadequacy and urge to withdraw. Yet, she attended the program. And, gradually, during the workshops she participated. Following the training she headed up a neighborhood "clean-up committee activity." It was a great success. Today Kathy Smith is president of the Association. Kathy herself has said: "I wouldn't be serving a president if I hadn't had the training." What is more, she can tell you how she used the training: "If I don't see someone's point, I give feedback to clarify... 'Is this what I'm hearing...Am I understanding when I hear you say... "'Before I knew how to listen actively I would get angry if I didn't understand the other person's point."

There is more to be said about Kathy. By way of preface I should say that within the past few months the east side area of Kalamazoo was chosen as the setting for establishing the Kalamazoo Neighborhood Housing Services, Inc., (KNHS), and its office. This is a local non-profit housing corporation to encourage neighborhood revitalization. The pro-

gram is modeled from similar NHS programs currently demonstrating throughout the U.S.A. successful techniques in home rehabilitation and general neighborhood improvement. Developed by the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, NHS is operated by funds generated locally, and it loans rehabilitation funds received from the federal community development block grant program. The Board of Directors of the Kalamazoo Neighborhood Services is made up of Eastside residents, City of Kalamazoo banking, business, and community-at-large representatives. It was the strength of the Eastside neighborhood that caused the NHS to be located there. And certainly part of that strength is the neighborhood leadership. In fact, Kathy Smith and Chet Douglass and three other members of the Eastside Neighborhood Association are representatives on the Board of NHS. What is more Kathy is cited by Chet Douglass for having given the kind of leadership to the NHS Board that has put the neighborhood representatives at parity with the businessmen, bankers, and city government people on the Board, who initially "tried to steal the show, but were brought up short by Kathy and other neighborhood representatives," according to one member. Yet Kathy emphasized that partnership is the key: "We (the neighborhood people) don't want to run the NHS alone." She also stresses that "It's very much my goal that the Eastside Neighborhood Association and NHS work closely together." I want to repeat: leadership, the kind we are talking about, can be taught and learned. The scenario and the words and actions of the cast of characters as cited are my evidence.

My third point has to do with costs. I claim that the costs of teaching and learning leadership, as described, are unbelievable low in terms of time, energy, and money. The workshops, overall, require

about 15 hours. That's about two-and-a-half hours, one night a week, for six weeks. The folks taking the training in the Eastside area found them fun and relaxing. And this has been our experience elsewhere, as well. The cost of materials is about $2.00 per participant--that covers the handouts, lecturettes, structured experience worksheets, and newsprint. What does $2.00 per person add up to? Almost $25.00 for a dozen people. Now you may ask, what do we pay the trainers? Nothing. They all have been volunteers. Our experience has shown that where volunteers are carefully selected for their skill in facilitating dialog; for their ability to stick with the format, and develop exercises relevant to the real-concerns and problems of the trainee group; and, for their commitment to help and enable others, then we can train them quickly, they do a good job, and they enjoy it.

My fourth point is that there are very few opportunities for grass-roots people in neighborhoods to obtain leadership training. This claim of mine is subject to some conditions. We both know there are a great many leadership training programs offered today. The variety of their thrust and content seems almost unlimited. Generally, however, three conditions limit the applicability of the kind of leadership training I have just described. You will find "adversarial" models of which the Midwest Academy, and I believe ACORN are typical examples. Many community people prefer instead cooperative, problem-solving, consensus forming models. And they would rather rely on democratic leadership or shared leadership, rather that on a paid staff leader system. Further, the adversarial models are not readily available to neighborhoods. And they are not inexpensive.

Next, the models offered by most consultants are simply beyond what the pocketbook of grassroots folks can afford. So, the University Associates, Situational Leadership, Zenger Miller and similar models are out of reach for neighborhood groups.

Many of the community education models can be adapted to the needs of neighborhood associations and similar organizations I believe. These would include Phil Clark's, Bob Biagi's and the programs produced by the Extension Division of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, to name only a few. However, they may have to adapt language and orientation to fit neighborhood folks, I think. The point here is that the community education group-training models are probably more widely available, at lower cost than any other models. And this brings me to my fifth and final point.

Community educators are strategically placed and qualified to deliver grassroots leadership training. Community schools of one type or another are virtually everywhere--in communities all across the land. Their mission, generally, is outreach; and their theme, generally, is everyone teaches, everyone learns. Their process, generally, is brokering: to bring teacher and learner together. In the case of leadership training this means bringing together facilitator and learner.

The community educator is a natural distributor for grassroots leadership training. You understand community--its needs, its resources, the learning processes, the delivery systems, the personal touch, the critical importance of making training relevant, meaningful, practical, accessible to everyone who can benefit from it. In short, only you can give democratic leadership development the impetus, the push and power so urgently needed by our citizens throughout the land.

How large is the need for leadership training in America's neighborhoods? The need is unlimited. Consider: there are about 85,000 public school buildings serving communities throughout the U.S. Conservatively speaking, those schools serve anywhere from six to eight neighborhood areas. That multiplies out to nearly 600,000 neighborhoods. Candidly, no one knows for sure how enormous this "market" is.

Yet size alone doesn't determine the significance of the need. The true significance of the need is that in neighborhoods the quality of life in America will be won or lost.

In their neighborhoods the American families frame their identity, fashion their environment, find their security -- or they fail to. In their neighborhoods individual family members build their community -- or they fail to. In their neighborhoods the American people fuse into political forces -- or they fail to. The neighborhood's central importance is that it is indeed home, for there we live.

Your outreach to the neighborhood is needed to help its members renew their quality of participation by renewing the quality of their leadership. Your outreach will touch neighbors' hearts and hopes -- as it did Chet's and Lucille's and Kathy's in my story. It will enable the likes of them to sharpen their skills and their purpose to build community together. And this we may all agree is urgently needed.

Thank you.